Progress toward a Rationally Designed Molecular Motor†

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ABSTRACT

A retrospective overview of the work in the author’s laboratory leading to a prototype (43a) of a chemically powered molecular motor is provided. Beginning with a molecular brake (23) and then proceeding through a molecular “ratchet” (31), the development of a rationally designed molecular motor is described. The thermodynamic underpinnings of the concept are outlined, the synthetic routes to 23, 31, and 43a, are summarized, and the data documenting the function of 23, 31, and 43a are presented.

There is something about motors and other engines of motion (e.g., rockets, jets, steam engines, etc.) that particularly fascinates people. The aim of this Account is to recount our efforts to achieve the first rationally designed, chemically powered molecular motor. The task is still far from complete, but enough has now been accomplished to warrant a report on a work in progress.

The goal of achieving a molecular motor designed and constructed “from scratch” has been one of long duration, but for many years we were unable to conceive of a viable design. Thinking yet again about the challenge in 1993—and coming up, as usual, with no solution—it occurred to us that if we could not achieve a design for something that created movement, perhaps if we were able to accomplish something which stopped movement—a molecular brake1,2—that might then provide insights which would ultimately help in the design of a molecular motor.

A Molecular Brake. The attempt to devise a molecular brake was our first foray into developing molecular devices, but it was not our first effort in molecular design.

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that such an action would bring the rotating triptycene to a halt.

Given the foregoing as the basis of the design, we turned to the synthesis of 7, which is outlined in Scheme 1. The synthesis of 7 was tackled as a group project, and the first synthesis was actually accomplished in 13 days. Addition of a variety of metal ions to solutions of 7 resulted in profound changes in the 1H NMR spectrum, in agreement with the formation of a metal complex with a geometry resembling that shown in 8. In particular, the peak in the NMR spectrum for Hx shifted nearly 2 ppm downfield, consistent with its being forced deep into the π cloud of the triple bond. Unfortunately, however, regardless of the metal ion used, the NMR spectrum indicated that the three blades of the triptycene were equivalent, meaning that rotation was still rapid, even at temperatures as low as −110 °C.

In seeking to account for the failure of braking observed with 7/8, we came to the conclusion that although the molecule did exist most of the time in the structure implicit in 8, the acetylene was not sufficiently rigid. Thus, instead of inserting a broomstick through the bicycle wheel spokes, we were, in effect, replacing the broomstick with playing cards (as some children do with their bicycles, because they like the sound it makes), with the moving spokes repeatedly dislodging the playing cards.

The cure appeared to be to excise the acetylene and attach the pyridine directly to the triptycene, as shown in 16. It was at this point that our prior work (Figure 1) in designing molecules paid dividends, because it is not possible to make space-filling (CPK) models of 16. Nonetheless, we believed that the models were misleading, especially since compound 17 had been reported in the literature7 and seemed to have normal stability.

Unfortunately, the synthesis of 16 (Scheme 2) failed in the final step, the benzyne addition to 22, for reasons we attribute to the electron-withdrawing properties of the pyridine on the anthracene. In the course of troubleshooting the synthesis of 16, 23 was prepared as summarized in Scheme 3. We had intended to eventually modify a molecule such as 23 in order to incorporate a tricyclic brake shoe, as in 30, but that proved unnecessary since 23 functioned as a molecular brake.
$^1$H NMR spectra of 23 (Figure 3) at room temperature indicate that the triptycene is spinning rapidly. Addition of mercuric ion to 23 engages the brake (eq 1) and slows the rotation of the triptycene. At $-30 \, ^\circ C$ the $^1$H NMR spectrum (Figure 4) indicates that rotation is completely stopped on the NMR time scale. The NMR spectrum also shows that the brake is operating by the intended mechanism, because in its arrested state (24) the molecule has a plane of symmetry evidenced by a two-proton doublet for the two H₄ protons and a one-proton doublet for the H₅ proton. As the $-30 \, ^\circ C$ sample is allowed to warm to $0 \, ^\circ C$, the brake begins to slip, as indicated by the broadened peaks for H₄ and H₅. At room temperature the brake is slipping sufficiently that the peaks for H₄ and H₅ coalesce. Engagement of the brake can be reversed simply by addition of EDTA, which removes the mercuric ion, thereby converting 24 to 23.

Our success in realizing the first molecular brake invigorated our quest for a molecular motor. But even though we had gleaned much from our efforts to achieve a molecular brake, we still had not learned how to construct a molecular motor. We had, however, reached the conclusion that it was likely that a necessary component of a molecular motor would be a ratchet.

A Molecular Ratchet. A schematic of a ratchet is shown in Figure 5. The three essential components of a ratchet are a wheel, a pawl, and a spring that holds the pawl against the wheel. In designing what we intended to be the ratchet, we retained the triptycene as the wheel, but switched the other component to a helicene, which we hoped would simultaneously serve as both the pawl and the spring. Although helicenes are helical rather than
flat, we envisioned that rotation of the triptycene around the triptycene/helicene bond would twist the helicene more out of planarity than optimal, and resistance to that deformation would provide the restoring force inherent in a spring. The molecule we chose as the ratchet is 31 (the methyl group is included only for synthetic reasons). A stereoview of 3 is shown in Figure 6.

As a control, we elected also to prepare the [3]helicene derivative 32. Molecular modeling\(^{11}\) of the barrier to rotation around the helicene/triptycene bond in 32 indicated, to our surprise, that the barrier to rotation in the [3]helicene was approximately 5 kcal/mol higher than the barrier to rotation in the [4]helicene 31. To us, this finding was counterintuitive, since we expected the molecule with the bigger pawl to have the higher barrier to rotation. Since at that time we were not yet believers in molecular modeling (this project has made us become so), the unexpected modeling results were not troubling, because we did not trust them. As it turns out, however, the calculations proved correct. (One of the aspects of this work that has been most enjoyable is that we keep getting counterintuitive findings.) In retrospect, we attribute the higher barrier to rotation in 32 to the ability of the [3]helicene to drop lower into the space between the triptycene blades in 32; in contrast, in 31 the [4]helicene gets “hung up” on a triptycene blade even in the most stable conformation and, as a result, the most stable ground state available is still destabilized. That conclusion is supported by the finding that, computationally, the most stable conformer of 31 is 14 kcal/mol less stable than its regioisomer 33.

In due course, molecules 31 and 32 were synthesized by the routes indicated in Schemes 4 and 5. \(^1\)H NMR
spectra of 31 and 32 were very revealing. In both cases, the spectra indicated that at room temperature, rotation around the triptycene/helicene bond was frozen on the NMR time scale. The NMR spectrum of 32 also showed the presence of a plane of symmetry, reminiscent of 24, indicating that either the [3]helicene (phenanthrene) was planar or it existed as rapidly interconverting helicene enantiomers and, therefore, was incapable of functioning as a ratchet. In contrast, however, in the case of triptycyl[4]helicene 31, 1H NMR spectroscopy indicated that each of the three triptycene blades resided in a different environment. In other words, 31 appeared to have the potential to function as a ratchet. The calculated energy diagram (Figure 7) for rotation around the triptycene/helicene bond in 31 reinforced that expectation because of the curve’s substantial asymmetry.

Two questions remained: (i) In which direction does the triptycene rotate? (ii) How does one tell? Presumably, one could use isotopic labeling to determine the direction of rotation, but such a strategy would require a large investment of effort in synthesis, atropisomer separation, and structure assignment. The NMR technique of “spin polarization transfer”, which allows one to “magnetically” label atoms, provides a much simpler method for answering the question. The peaks corresponding to H_a, H_b, and H_c (see 42) were identified using NOE correlations with the bridgehead proton, H_x, which was identified by its unique chemical shift. Because of the high barrier to rotation (which turns out to be 25 kcal/mol), we had to conduct the spin polarization experiments at 160 °C, which, coincidentally, was the upper limit of our variable-temperature NMR probe.

The results of the spin polarization experiments are summarized in Figure 8 (which is, technically, a difference spectrum). Irradiation of the resonance for H_a (equivalent results were obtained in separate experiments irradiating H_b and, again separately, H_c) gave the spectra shown. If one performs an “observe” after a short delay, most of the polarization remains in the peak where it was originally put, but to the extent that any of the polarization has moved, it moves equally to the other two peaks. With longer delays before observing, more and more of the polarization moves, but it always moves equally to both other peaks. That is, the triptycene is rotating equally in both directions, and 31 is not functioning as a ratchet.

To those with a heightened sensitivity to the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the Principle of Microscopic Reversibility, that finding will come as no surprise. But to those who were seduced (manipulation of molecular models is particularly effective in this regard) into expecting unidirectional rotation, further explanation is perhaps in order. Reexamination of the energy diagram in Figure 7 is particularly informative. The asymmetry of the curve was noted earlier, but that is a red herring. What is more important is that, because of the symmetry of the triptycene, the energies of the two conformations designated 0° and 120° are identical. As anyone who has taken
(or taught) Introductory Organic Chemistry should remember, what is most important about an energy diagram is not the shape, but the height of the energy of activation hill. Since the energies at 0° and 120° in Figure 7 are identical, the barrier to rotation from 120° to 0° is identical to the barrier for rotation from 0° to 120°. In other words, the barriers to clockwise and counterclockwise rotation are the same, and 31 could never have functioned as a ratchet.

So the question then becomes: How does one modify 31 to achieve unidirectional rotation; to wit, the motor?

**A Prototype of a Molecular Motor.** The concept is outlined in Figure 9, which is a partial reiteration of the energy diagram in Figure 7, except that it represents 240° of rotation around the triptycene/helicene bond, instead of only 120°, as in Figure 7. The black circle represents the energy of an individual molecule, with respect to rotation around the triptycene/helicene bond. As indicated in Figure 9b, most of the time the molecule is in a low-energy conformational state. Every once in a while, however, each molecule achieves a somewhat excited state with respect to rotation around the triptycene/helicene bond (the t1/2 for thermally exciting molecules 10 kcal/mol above ground state at 25°C is 2.3 × 10⁻⁶ s). If one can trap the molecule in the excited state c, figuratively by enlisting the brick wall shown in d then, to use a mountain-climbing analogy, in d the molecule is in a new base camp, closer to the energy of activation summit. Random thermal energy will then eventually elevate the molecule to the summit (e), from which it can descend the other side (−f), which corresponds to unidirectional rotation from b to f. Put another way, once b has been trapped as in d, if one regards the right-hand half of panel d in Figure 9 as a new energy diagram where the black circle corresponds to the starting material, then that is...

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**FIGURE 8.** Results of spin polarization transfer experiment at 160°C (calibrated temperature). The resonances for H₆, H₆, and H₂ (see 42) appear at 7.6, 7.1, and 6.9 ppm (not necessarily respectively). The spin of the proton resonating at 7.6 was polarized, and transfer of that polarization was monitored over time (the polarization stays with the proton originally polarized but, because of rotation, appears in a different peak).

**FIGURE 9.** Schematic representation of the concepts underlying the design of the system. (a) Energy diagram representing 240° of rotation around the triptycene/helicene bond (black wedge in 31), with a barrier of ~25 kcal/mol. (b) At any given time a single molecule (represented by the filled black circle) will usually exist in a low-energy conformation such as ~120° (~0° and ~240° because of the three-fold symmetry of the triptycene) around the triptycene/helicene bond. (c) Within a very brief time span, random thermal energy temporarily elevates all individual molecules to conformationally excited states (for example, t1/2 for thermally exciting molecules 10 kcal/mol above ground state at 25°C is 2.3 × 10⁻⁶ s). (d) Conformationally excited rotamers in c are trapped and prevented from rotating back to a lower-energy conformation. (e) The trapped molecules are propelled by random thermal energy to the top of the energy barrier (reversion to the position in d—but not b—is possible, but readily reversible). (f) Descent from the summit in e to the next energy minimum is easy and virtually irreversible (because the reverse reaction (f → e) has an energy requirement of +25 kcal/mol, which is effectively inaccessible (t1/2 for achieving +25 kcal/mol is 63.2 h at 25°C)).
FIGURE 10. Sequence of events in the chemically powered rotation of 43a to 43b. See text for discussion. Although 43a and 44 are not identical, to a first approximation they both conceptually correspond to Figure 9b. Compounds 45 and 46 correspond to Figure 9c and Figure 9d, respectively; compounds 47 and 43b both correspond roughly to Figure 9f.
an energy diagram for an exoergic reaction leading to f. The 25 kcal/mol released in the e → f conversion is immediately released to the system and is not directly available to drive the reverse reaction.

The issue then becomes how to build the brick wall and trap the molecule in an excited state. As a proof of principle, we chose to modify the “ratchet” 31 to 43a as shown in Figure 10, where an amino group is attached to one blade of the triptycene and a hydroxyalkyl group is attached to the helicene. Using the chemical fuel phosgene (which, to our mind, is chemically quite reminiscent of Nature’s standard fuel, ATP), the amino group in 43a is to be armed as an isocyanate (44). In its low-energy conformations, the isocyanate is too far away from the hydroxy group attached to the helicene for urethane formation to occur between the two groups. However, if the triptycene rotates some 60° clockwise as drawn (f → 45) to a conformationally excited state, then the isocyanate is close enough to the hydroxy group for urethane formation to occur (f → 46), thereby trapping the molecule in an energetically excited conformation around the triptycene/helicene bond. Compound 46 corresponds to panel d in Figure 9. In due course, random thermal energy will cause 46 to rotate “over the hump” (the hump corresponds to panel e in Figure 9) and down the other side to give 47. Finally, cleavage of the urethane provides 43b, in which the triptycene has rotated unidirectionally clockwise 120°. The design of 43 was worked out in part with molecular modeling (PM3) using the program Spartan.11

The structure (43) chosen for the prototype was intentionally similar to the structure of the “ratchet” 31 as possible, in order to make the best use of what had been learned earlier regarding synthesis and modeling. Nonetheless, the synthesis of 43, which is summarized in Scheme 6, proved much more exciting than the synthesis of 31. A multiyear synthetic effort did, however, ultimately provide 43.

Once 43a was in hand (and separated from its other two low-energy atropisomers), the time had arrived to experimentally evaluate the concepts. Using a combination of 1H NMR (shown in Figure 11) and infrared (ReactIR technology15 not shown) spectrometry to monitor reaction progress and assign structures, the essential concept was validated. In particular, addition of phosgene and Et3N to a solution of 43a in CDCl3 resulted (Figure 10) in the conversion 43a → 44 → 45 → 46 → 47 conversion; Figure 11 provides the 1H NMR data and the structures assigned to the individual peaks. Urethane 47 was then cleaved to 43b. A control study demonstrated that reaction of atropisomer 43b with Cl2C=O/Et3N gave 47 but, importantly, 47 did not convert to 46.

The chemically powered unidirectional rotation of 43a to 43b was thus achieved, and a prototype of a chemically powered molecular motor was in hand!

One additional study providing further support of the underlying strategic design has since been conducted. If the concepts illustrated in Figures 9 and 10 are valid, one should be able to accelerate the rate of rotation by shortening the tether attached to the helicene in 43a, because then the truncated analogue will be trapped in a higher energy rotational state than 46. In fact, that prediction is borne out. Replacement of the 3-carbon tether in 43a with a 2-carbon tether as in 60a (Scheme 7)
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not only results in faster rotation \((t_{1/2} \approx 5 \text{ min instead of } 3 \text{ h})\), but actually changes the rate-limiting step from \(46 \rightarrow 47\) in the case of the 3-carbon tether to \(61 \rightarrow 62\) in the case of the 2-carbon tether.

**Conclusion.** The results recounted above describe our efforts in the construction of molecular devices, beginning with a molecular brake and leading to the prototype of a chemically powered molecular motor. Much remains to be done before our motor rivals in speed and continual operation its biological and mechanical counterparts. The next step, however, is now clear: to achieve repeated rotation by modifying \(43a/60a\) so that each blade of the triptycene is ready to be selectively armed at the appropriate time, and to include in the system (e.g., by attachment to the helicene) units with the appropriate spatial positioning that can capture and deliver \(\text{Cl}_2\text{C}=\text{O}\) and cleave a urethane, as represented in Figure 12. Efforts in that direction are now in progress. It is our hope that the work to date may also lead to a better understanding of some of the design features underlying biological and other molecular motors.

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